

# The Taking Ways of an Old School Bus

*In Choctaw County it is taking pre-school experiences to rural children and enrichment to elementary grade pupils.*

By JOAN THOMPSON KELLEY  
and J. FOSTER WATKINS

It has been a long time since the old-fashioned rolling store rumbled around Choctaw County on the theory that "if the people can't come to the store, take the store to the people." But the idea has been recalled and updated by a group of educators from the Southeastern Education Laboratory and Choctaw County. In 1969 the "store" is an

old converted school bus painted white and dubbed the "Readimobile," the "customers" are Choctaw County's rurally isolated pre-school children, and the "goods" are readiness experiences designed to overcome cultural deprivation.

"Read me a story" is a familiar plea in countless homes all over Alabama; and in each of these homes a mother not too reluctantly stops what she is doing, sits down with her child, snuggles him close

to her, and in this simple, familiar act, she provides the child not only with a story but with experiences that help prepare him for school. Research has fairly well established this to be true, but it has not solved the problem of the equally large number of children whose mothers can't or won't read to them. What can be done for the child who is approaching school age without ever hearing a story and without the numerous other experiences now believed to make him "ready" for school? Is it possible and feasible for a public education agency to provide preschool experiences that will significantly affect a child's later academic achievements? The answer to such questions may well be found in a once-dilapidated school bus.

The Readimobile (pronounced Ready-mobile) is a fully mobile audio-visual unit operating as a joint venture which provides an excellent example of co-ordinated and cooperative use of federal funds and which hopefully will answer some questions or solve some problems for the three groups involved. The program was initiated by the Southeastern Education Laboratory, whose primary purpose is seeking out and developing innovative edu-



The Readimobile takes on pre-schoolers in a rural community.



Mrs. Marie McDonald, the Readimobile "presenter," reads to a group aboard the bus.



A session aboard the bus begins with an outside activity. When they have exercised, the children enter the Readimobile for a film, a story, or art activities, as seen below.



(Photos by Lockwood Livingston)

disseminating research data on promising ones. The Choctaw County Board of Education is seriously concerned about the increasing number of first graders each year who come to school severely handicapped by a dearth of experiences, and the Board is therefore willing to earmark Title I funds for a project aimed at overcoming cultural deprivation before the children get to school. The pre-schoolers involved in the program are at worst enjoying themselves; and if the best proves to be the case, they are receiving experiences which will contribute significantly to their formal schooling. Each of these three view the Readimobile program from a different vantage point.

#### ORIGIN OF THE IDEA

For SEL the Readimobile is a research project structured to answer specific questions. The mobile unit concept was originally the Children's Caravan project of Weston, Connecticut. Funded by OEO, the primary objective was to broaden the experiences of children through films and filmstrips. When the OEO project terminated, the Laboratory recognized the potential that the units seem to have for a previously identified education need in the Southeast—kindergarten experiences for those children who live in remote rural sections of counties in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi.

The Readimobile in Choctaw County is only one of six located in three states which the laboratory is observing in operation, and it is therefore operating within certain broad guidelines. The preschool sites are located so as to provide easy access for preschool children. The Readimobile visits each site once a week for a two-hour session. The experiences planned for the children at each site during a given week are similar in nature. In essence a major cooperative research effort is underway with the SEL employing its

preschool program and with the six systems implementing the defined program through local revenues. Hopefully the program will yield concrete findings for SEL.

The Choctaw County Board of Education sees the program as one possible answer to the educational problems caused by cultural deprivation. In Choctaw County, of approximately 400 new first graders each year, less than half have participated in readiness programs of any kind. Many of the children who come to school for the first time have very limited vocabularies; their attention span is short; many have never heard a story read; they have never held a crayon; they cannot respond to simple questions; they are unable to name colors; they have had no experiences on which to build a first grade vocabulary; in short, they aren't ready to begin schooling. These children start out behind and fall further behind academically each year until a large percentage eventually drop out. The pattern is a familiar one to all Alabama teachers. The Board is investing ESEA Title I money in the project in hope of finding financially feasible means of helping these children without breaking an already strained budget.

#### CHILDREN FIND IT FUN

For the most important participants in the experiment, the children, the Readimobile is just plain fun. Red striped awnings against the white exterior present a festive look to children arriving for a session. Each child is greeted outside by the two people who make up the Readimobile crew. A ball or a jump rope is produced and a day's session begins with play, the preschool version of physical education.

Next, the children are invited to enter the Readimobile. The interior is designed to give a special effect as soon as the child enters. The last semblance of a school bus has been

removed and in their place are curved risers which, like the floor, are carpeted in plush scarlet so that a child can drop down anywhere he chooses and have a comfortable seat. The gray walls are covered with large framed pictures carrying out the theme of the season or of the day's program. Indirect lighting softens the total scene. The front windows are covered with red draperies and at the end of the unit hangs a golden curtain. On one side of the air-conditioned unit is a bookcase filled with books and stories to thrill little ones.

The two people conducting the program are inside to welcome the children. The driver technician, Lockwood Livingston, and the program presenter, Mrs. Marie Donald, have every detail planned to capitalize on the effect achieved. Mrs. Donald holds a microphone plugged into the push button sound system so that her voice will have the same fidelity as the movie or record she will present. She selects a book from the shelf, gathers the children around her, and together they go through the book relating the pictures and words to things already familiar to the child. At a given signal from her, the lights begin to dim until it is dark. A movie of the book appears on the golden curtain which gradually opens to reveal a full size screen. Many "ohs" and "ahs" are heard as the children see and hear the book come alive on the screen. As the film ends, the curtain gradually closes; the lights come slowly up. While the mood created by the story remains, the children are provided crayons, scissors, paste, and paper. On tables that fold out from the walls, the children work at activities related to the book and the film.

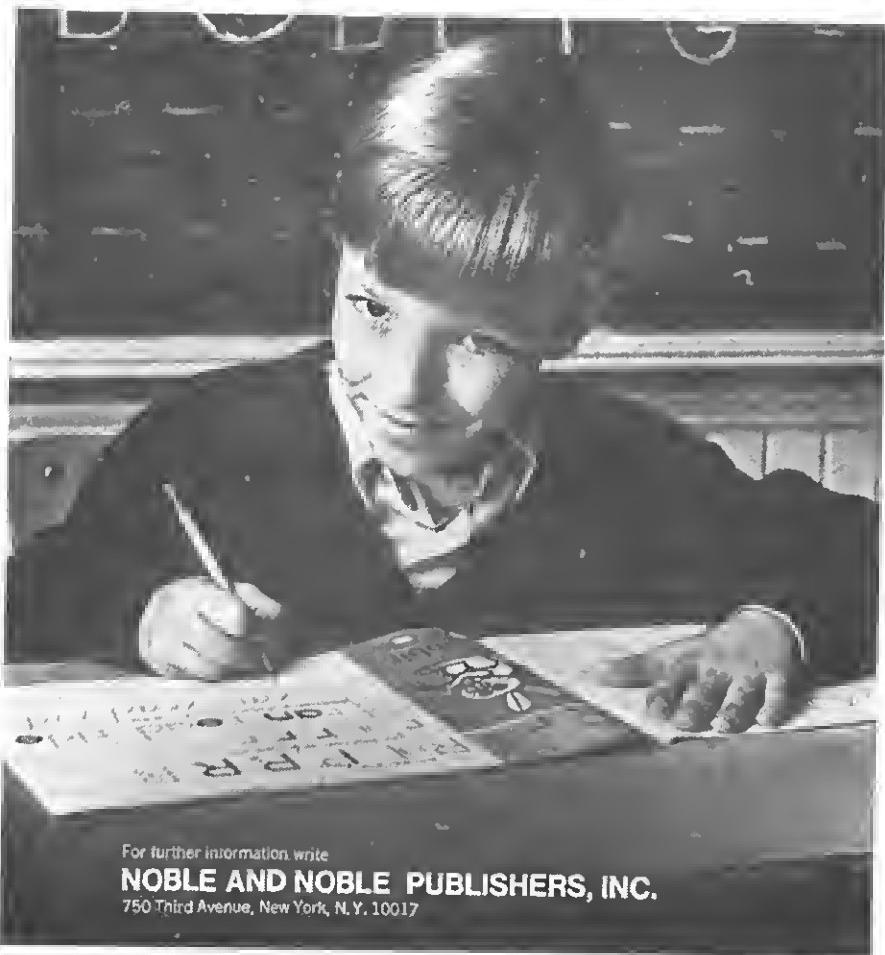
As the session ends, the child has his art work to take home and many of the films have correlated paperback books which are given to the

(See *OLD SCHOOL BUS*, page 32)

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(from page 10)

children. The child has enjoyed himself for two hours, he has something to take home with him, and he has had numerous experiences that stimulated different senses. He has participated in formal developmental activities.

Though all of the experiences provided for the child are of a readiness nature, the program is designed to include two types of experiences. Some are provided from an "experience - for-the - experience-sake" point of view and deal primarily with instilling values and positive attitudes. These are provided through the movietime approach described earlier. A second type of activities is conducted which focus more directly upon readiness needs for future cognitive or "academically-related" experiences. This type of experience is provided through the use of manipulative aids and student centered activities adapted from conventional kindergarten or preschool programs. The programs are varied and yet each is in keeping with the structure of the SEL research design. Within limits, SEL has made efforts to insure some degree of comparability of experiences among the six Readimobiles to assist in the evaluation design for the program.

Various methods are being used to evaluate the project. Profile data on the participating children, periodic samples of the children's work, weekly reports on program operation by Mrs. Donald and Mr. Livingston are being kept. A video tape of one of the first sessions of the year will be compared with a similar tape of one of the last sessions. Tape recordings from each session will show verbal progression or the lack of it. One other basis for evaluation will be readiness tests. Each spring the six elementary schools in Choctaw County give preschool readiness tests to all children who will enter first grade in the fall. Comparisons will be made of the scores of children who have

had no formal preschool experiences, of those children who have attended the private kindergartens of the county, and of those who have attended the Readimobile program.

One further aspect of the Readimobile operations in Choctaw County involves early elementary students. To qualify the total program for funding under Title I, the overall project was written as a combined preschool, primary grades program. Three days a week the Readimobile visits the rurally isolated locations for the preschool portion of the program with Mondays and Tuesdays devoted to visits to the regular elementary schools. The audio-visual programs presented to the primary grades during the visits to the schools are viewed as supplementary experiences with follow-up activities conducted by the classroom teachers. The enthusiastic approval received for this part of the program from both students and teachers seems to indicate that the Readimobile as a vehicle for learning has many possible and varied uses.

Should the experiment show that the Readimobile program has had significant impact on the children to merit other systems considering the ideas, what are the advantages? Financially the idea is sound. The cost of converting, equipping, and operating the one unit costs far less than building and equipping facilities at several schools. The operation of the one bus is far less costly than the cost of transporting preschoolers. The two people needed to conduct the program do not have to have professional training. Further, if a system does not have enough preschoolers to utilize the unit five days a week as is the case in Choctaw County, the other time can be used most successfully to provide enrichment experiences for early elementary students. In summary, if the audio-visual unit proves to be as academically sound as it is financially feasible, it is safe to say that many of Alabama's old school buses may one day get the "Red-Carpet" treatment.

SUGGESTIONS  
we hope prove useful.

## FUN GAMES from CARDBOARD TUBES

Children love making and playing these games. By "cardboard tubes" is meant the rolls inside paper toweling, aluminum foil, etc. All you need are tubes, scissors, paper, paste, poster paint, some pipe cleaners and a paper plate.



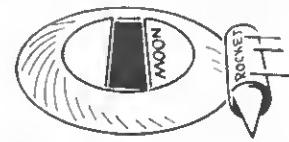
**ANSWER-WAND** Choose tube for a wand. Make aluminum foil cube that easily slides in and out of tube. On separate slips of paper, one each to be pasted on a side of cube, print answers: Yes, No, Ask Again, Maybe, etc. Each child has a chance to call question into wand and shake out cube with reply on top side.



**FISH-WACKY-DO** Make 8 fish from  $2\frac{1}{2}$ " diam. tube; slit down through center; cut in 8" lengths. Paint red; dry; paint a tail, eyes, scales in white. Paste to curved underside of bodies paper slips upon which are printed a stunt, such as *beg in dog style, meow, hop like a rabbit, etc.* In turn, players choose a fish, turn it over, do stunt called for, on the printed slip.



**SHOE THE HORSE** Cut tube 8" long for the body. From paper cut horse's head, pointed ears, open mouth, finely slashed mane. Paste paper over top of tube; into this insert base of horse's neck; paste. Cut a tail from a tube and affix to body with a pipe cleaner. Cut pipe cleaners in 4 even lengths, for legs; firmly affix to body and turn hooves up for hooks. Cut rings from a tube for shoes. Shoe horse as though playing Ring Toss.



**ROCKET ROLL** Cut slot out of a paper plate big enough for rocket to roll into. Paint orange. Print on word Moon. Rocket is a tube cut  $4\frac{1}{2}$ " long. Form a paper cone; paste firmly into rocket; paint blue. Put moon and rocket on floor; stand 2 feet away. Give rocket a push. Try to land it on moon—that is, roll it into slot.



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